

The Art of Presenting

By Kathryn Lukey-Coutsocostas and Julia Tanner-Bogia

There are many reasons why people decide to give talks at conventions. On the professional level, it may be a step toward obtaining a better position or because it looks impressive on a CV. On the personal level, it can be intellectually stimulating and enjoyable to have the opportunity to share ideas and theories with colleagues. Our aim in this article is to offer encouragement and ideas to colleagues who are thinking about giving a presentation.

Our experience has been that although the ideas contained in presentations can often be valuable, they are not always presented in the most effective way. Presenting to peers is not an identical process to presenting to students or trainees. In the classroom, teachers have the time to build rapport with their students. Presenters, however, make a quick entrance and exit, often to a large group of total strangers, and never have time to "finish the lesson next week."

The power dynamics also differ. In the classroom, teachers must sometimes assume the role of "informer" talking to the "uninformed." There are elements of this role in a presentation; but since presenters address colleagues and peers, they must find the balance between "equal" talking to "equal" and "informer" talking to the "uninformed." While a lot of elicitation may be praiseworthy in the classroom, it may be seen as patronizing or a waste of time at a presentation.

A Plan of Action

In this article we would like to suggest how a talk can be effectively planned and delivered. We will cover the following areas: fears, choosing a topic, planning, title/summary/abstract, equipment, delivery, and evaluation of the talk. (See Figure 1 below).

1. Fears

Not many people naturally enjoy getting up in front of a large group of strangers and talking about a complex subject. First of all, this fear of public speaking needs to be overcome. This can be done in steps. Start by presenting an idea to a colleague or friend, then to a small group and then to a larger group of sympathetic peers. Put yourself in a positive frame of mind by remembering that your audience has chosen willingly to come to your talk.

It is also natural for nonnative speakers to feel somewhat uncomfortable about giving a presentation in a language other than their mother tongue. This fear can be

overcome by ensuring that you know the specific English needed for your subject (the EFL "jargon"). In addition, it is important that you are familiar with the English needed to make a presentation flow naturally, such as opening and closing phrases or linkers like "My first point

is" and "Moving on to point two." Finally, when working from a prepared text, you need to find a balance between a formal written style of English and an informal style of spoken English.

2. Choosing a topic

Many presenters suggest starting with practical ideas which have worked for you in the classroom. It is also important to back up your practical ideas with some kind of theoretical justification: Research the topic and include some references to your reading in the talk. It is a good idea to choose a topic which is of current interest. This will probably mean that your talk is well attended. If the convention has a theme, try to show that you are linking your topic to that theme.

3. Planning

Before you begin to plan, consider your audience. A group of teachers may call for one type of approach and a group of university academics another. Think about what they already know. How much background needs to be given? Do key terms need to be defined and main points need to be simplified? And what should be the balance, for example, between entertainment and information? Avoid material that may be offensive.

Once you have assessed the needs of your audience, a plan can be made. Whether the presentation is 15 minutes or 15 hours, the framework remains the same: introduction of idea(s), development of idea(s), and conclusion. To avoid confusion, handle one topic or idea at a time. Some people like to use a mindmap (see Figure 2 below). Others like to use the traditional "table of contents" approach with headings and subheadings.

The opening must be fresh in order to grab the audience's attention. It can take the form of a challenge, a topical reference, a striking visual, an activity, a joke, an anecdote, or a quote. (Note that these can also provide spirited endings.) Some like to present an outline of where they are going, while others prefer to keep the audience in suspense as the talk unfolds. Either way, it helps if the audience can actually see an outline of the main points as you make them.

This is where visuals can play a key role. Before investing your time in preparing them, check what the facility has to offer: overhead projector, projected computer screen, a slide projector, flip board, chalk board, white board, room to display charts or posters? On your personal notes, use coloured highlight markers to mark when to use the visuals.

You also have a choice of when to give out handouts. Some like to give them out at the beginning of the talk so that the audience can make notes on them. Others like to hand them out at the moment they are needed. Still others prefer to distribute them at the end, so that the audience pays attention throughout.

A clear, logical order must be found for the middle. The pace must be varied to reduce the possibility of boredom. Individual work, pair work, or group activities may be incorporated, depending on the type of presentation, the size of the audience, the facilities, and the time available.

Keep in mind that you should have some fillers such as anecdotes, activities, or examples on hand to add or remove depending on the time available. Mark these on your personal notes with coloured highlighters or double brackets.

Statements and proposals should be backed up by facts. Sources can be acknowledged throughout the talk or at the end in spoken or written form; a bibliography or suggested reading list is a good idea.

Give your audience visual and audible signals that the end is coming. They may feel "something is missing" if you do not provide some kind of summing up. Since time is a very important factor in talks and nothing is more unprofessional than a speaker who goes on and on over the limit, choose a flexible ending. A question-and-answer period is one way to finish; but remember, a strong ending makes for a lasting final impression.

Once your plan is complete, you can fill in the details. Think about how to prepare your notes for the actual presentation. Some presenters like to work from numbered cards. Others prefer to work from notes on paper. If you choose to work

from a whole written text, make sure that you present it in an interactive style, maintaining plenty of eye contact.

4. Title/summary/abstract

When deciding on a title you can adopt one of two approaches. You can choose a simple and clear approach which says in a nutshell what the talk will be about, such as "Ten Practical Ideas for Teaching Vocabulary." Or you can choose to mystify or amuse, thus motivating people to come to the talk because the title sounds intriguing, like "Why Do I Call My Computer Names?" If you are absolutely stuck for a good title, try brainstorming with a few friends. The title is often what attracts people to a talk, so choose it carefully.

The summary should match what you are going to talk about. Participants justifiably get quite annoyed if a talk bears little relation to what the summary in the program stated. The summary should, of course, not exceed the number of words requested by the convention organizers.

The abstract should be an accurate, simplified version of the actual talk with a rationale for the presentation and some academic references. Again, it is important to keep within the stated word limit.

5. Equipment.

Try to familiarize yourself with the room and equipment beforehand. Is all the equipment that you need there and in good working order? Even check to see that there is a piece of chalk for the board!

If you intend to use a microphone, test to ensure you are holding it an appropriate distance from your mouth. If you are not using a microphone, check at the beginning of your talk that you are projecting your voice sufficiently. It is a good idea to imagine that you are talking to the back row throughout the presentation.

In using an overhead projector here are some points to remember:

- Don't overload the transparency with information.
- Use large handwriting or typeset
so the words are visible from the back.
- Check how the projector works before the talk begins.
- Focus your transparency so that it is visible to all.
- Turn off the projector when not in use.

6. Delivery

The best presentation in the world will bomb if it is not delivered well. Start preparing for the delivery long before you are at the podium: practise at home. Rehearse the talk, and time it until you feel comfortable with it. Use the same notes you will be using at the actual presentation to become familiar with their location on the page.

Immediately before delivery, try to relax. Obviously this is easier said than done. It may help to keep in mind that even seasoned speakers get preperformance jitters. Taking three deep breaths may help relax you. Or you might visualize a situation in which you were confident and successful in the past. When you walk up to the podium with this sense of calm and control, the audience will respond accordingly.

Your voice must be in prime working order. Speak slowly and clearly. Note that coffee, coke, chocolate, and cigarettes dry out the throat. Water and herbal teas are beneficial. Thinking of a lemon may help a dry mouth.

Project your voice or use a microphone; ask the audience if you are not sure, and follow their advice. Speak to the entire room, and take care not to favour one side. Eye contact should be maintained. It is useful to choose a few key people to watch for immediate reactions, with the occasional sweep of the entire audience.

Gauge the audience. If you see that people are starting to fidget, look away, or lean back with crossed arms, do something to change your style: change the volume of your voice, speed up or slow down the pace, pause, say something funny, call on an audience member for a response, physically move, or have them move (e.g., stand up). These actions can regain the audience's attention. It also helps to work distractions, like the noise of the air conditioning, into your talk.

Do not forget that you are communicating with your words and your body. Your posture, movements, facial expressions, and appearance all reflect on you and your message. Use them to your advantage.

7. Evaluation

Make notes as soon after the talk as possible about its strengths and weaknesses. Try to take this self-evaluation into account when planning your next talk. An excellent way of getting feedback is to ask a trusted colleague to come to the presentation. He or she will probably be able to provide you with some very useful evaluation. Remember, too, that questions at the end of a talk are usually an indication of interest and a sign that the talk made a positive impression.

To conclude, presentations are for the listeners. They deserve the best we can give them.

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FIGURE 1

PRE-PRESENTATION CHECKLIST		
1. FEARS		Yes!
Have I:	taken steps to overcome my fears?	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. CHOOSING A TOPIC		
Have I:	chosen a topic I feel comfortable with?	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. PLANNING		
Have I:	considered my audience's needs?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	provided a snappy opening?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	developed the ideas logically and clearly?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	concluded appropriately?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	prepared good activities/visuals/handouts?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	prepared easy-to-follow personal notes?	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. TITLE		
Have I:	thought carefully about the title?	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. EQUIPMENT		
Have I:	thought about what equipment I will need?	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. DELIVERY		
Have I:	practiced enough?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	lined myself?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	thought about how to hold my audience's attention?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	learned how to project my voice?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	mastered a natural, relaxed image?	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. EVALUATION		
Have I:	asked a trusted colleague to come to the presentation and give me feedback?	<input type="checkbox"/>

FIGURE 2

